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FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0374
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 003602

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/I SIBLEY, D STAFF FOR JOST

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/13/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: BASRA REGION FORMATION SUPPORTERS SUBMIT
SIGNATURES; ULTIMATE SUCCESS UNLIKELY

REF: A. BAGHDAD 2875

[¶](#)B. BAGHDAD 2803

[¶](#)C. BAGHDAD 3107

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Classified By: A/DCM Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶](#)11. (C) Summary: On November 10, allies of Basra Governor Mohammed Wa'eli (Fadhilah) submitted 35,000 signatures in favor of a referendum to form a one-province Basra Regional Government. Several additional steps will be needed, however, to force a referendum, and it is unlikely that a referendum vote will take place in 2009. A series of October 26-29 meetings in Basra between Senior Advisor Gordon Gray and local leaders indicated that support for the Governor's initiative is weak, though many support region formation in principle. Wa'eli revealed to Gray that he will not be running in the provincial elections, which further limits his leverage. Provincial elections, scheduled to take place before any referendum could realistically be held, complicate and likely reduce the chances for referendum success. The candidate list released on November 2 shows that the established religious parties are forging rival coalitions with satellite small parties and independents. ISCI/Badr, which has been the biggest proponent nationally of forming regions, is cool to the Basra proposal, however. Some regional ISCI/Badr leaders still talk of a nine-province region in the Iraqi South, but our sense is that the national leaders are being more cautious now. They speak of multiple regions in the south, but they also warn that this needs to occur gradually and with consultations among the groups. Moreover, the difficulty involved in meeting the criteria to hold a Basra region referendum makes the idea more of a dream for now. End summary.

Two Percent, Ten Percent

[¶](#)12. (C) Referendum movement organizer Wael Abd al-Latif, a parliamentarian from the Iraqiya List and cousin of Governor Wa'eli, on November 10 submitted to the Iraqi High Electoral Commission (IHEC) 35,000 signatures in favor of forming a one-province Basra Regional Government. He was supported in his efforts by several local small party and tribal leaders. The number of signatures clears the two percent threshold (approximately 28,000) needed to pursue next steps in favor of a referendum. IHEC has three days in which to announce the request for a region. IHEC must afford eligible voters at least one month to express their views on a specially prepared register, in order to determine whether the requisite 10 percent of eligible voters (about 140,000) have supported the petition. If 10 percent of the voters support the initiative, IHEC has 15 days to take measures to conduct the referendum, which is to be held within three months, although IHEC may extend this period by one month.

¶3. (C) (Comment: Given that the Governor and his allies took several months to gather 35,000 as of yet uncertified signatures, it seems unlikely they could gather the remaining 100,000-plus signatures anytime soon. The requirement that IHEC open polling centers to facilitate collection of remaining signatures may provide a significant boost to the movement. Media coverage of the submission of signatures has been minimal, however, suggesting that there is not yet a great deal of public buzz to propel the movement forward. End comment.)

Local Skepticism

¶4. (C) Governor Wa'eli claims support for his referendum from most local power players -- including, implausibly, all three branches of Da'wa -- with only ISCI/Badr representatives sitting on the fence. While Embassy and REO contacts generally express skepticism toward the Governor's initiative, many at least support region formation in principle. Moderate Shi'a cleric Abdel al-Moussawi and Amar al-Fayez, Director of the Law Support Committee, spoke enthusiastically in an October 29 meeting about "someday" forming a region, and asked Gray for assurance that the SOFA would still cover Basra if it does so. Others expressed philosophical objections to region formation. Awad al-Abdan of the National Dialogue Front (which represents many of the 20 percent minority Sunni population) opposes any type of region formation in the South on the grounds that it would be a precursor to the division of Iraq. IHEC Governorate Electorate Office Director Hassim Jodah told us that it would be a bad idea to form a Basra Region, despite

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the probable economic benefits, because it would reduce the Iraqi Security Forces' ability to provide protection against Iran, and would invite new forms of corruption. (Comment: If leaders like Moussawi and Fayez decide to throw their considerable weight behind Wa'eli's initiative, the chances of holding and passing a referendum increase considerably. Thus far there are no indications that they have done so. End comment.)

ISCI/Badr Opposition

¶5. (C) Local consensus (outside the Governor) holds that ISCI/Badr will aggressively oppose the formation of a Basra Regional Government. To emphasize the point, Abdan, Moussawi, and Fayez all contended that the local IHEC office is riddled with ISCI members willing to do what it takes to alter elections in their favor -- though the latter two said that professionalism at IHEC is improving. In his October 29 meeting with Gray, Basra Badr leader Abu Hassan al-Rashid, viewed by many as a potential new governor if ISCI/Badr does well in the provincial elections, said categorically that Basra should not be a one-province region. He suggested that Fadhilah and two small local parties were the movement's only real supporters. He couched his statements in a way that suggested that neither he nor ISCI had given up on the dream of a nine-province southern regional government. At the national level, Reda Taki, a member of the ISCI national leadership council, told A/DCM November 12 that the referendum petition was ill-timed. It had not been discussed among the national political blocs and hence had stirred controversy at a moment when Iraq does not need more internal disputes, he stated.

Nine-Province Region Formation?

¶ 6. (C) ISCI as a party is not entirely of one view on whether to pursue a nine-province federalist regional government, but our contacts at the national level seem to be distinctly cooling to the idea. ISCI leader Ammar al-Hakim told PolMinCouns in September (ref C) that ISCI remains committed to its federalist dream. Finance Minister Bayan Jabr, a senior ISCI official, refined this thinking in a conversation with a visiting American expert on November 10. He said that ISCI will stop pushing hard for a nine-province region, saying multiple regions would be acceptable instead. Vice President Adel Abdel Mahdi has likewise indicated in recent conversations to the Ambassador and to this visiting expert that his party will stop pushing the idea of a broad southern region. Abdel Mahdi on November 12 said that the Basra region idea would encounter opposition. In time, he noted, there will be gradually developing efforts to establish regions. Provincial authorities in the relatively poor, oil-free, ISCI-dominated South Central region have consistently indicated to PRT and the Embassy that they want to continue pursuing a nine-province region. As Diwaniyah Provincial Chairman Khalidi (ISCI) told Gray on August 27, "the Shi'a area of the country should be able to decide how to manage its (oil) revenues."

The Mechanics of It

¶ 7. (C) The mechanics of nine-province region formation make it nearly impossible that the South, with its highly fractured political landscape, could pull itself together to form a regional government anytime soon. According to the Regions Formation Law, organizers of a nine-province regional government would have to gather either the signatures of ten percent of voters in each province or approval from one-third of the PC members in each province in order to force a referendum. The process is even more onerous if the voters or PCs offer conflicting proposals. Over 50 percent of the electorate in each province would have to participate, with a majority of those voting in favor. If any of the nine provinces failed to approve the referendum, the entire proposal would fail, and no new application could be put to a referendum for at least a year. (Comment: ISCI does not currently have the ability to organize a nine-province region primarily because it is weak in oil-rich Basra and Maysan -- which have many Sadrists voters skeptical of region formation -- and would have a hard time fulfilling referendum criteria in those two provinces. End comment.)

¶ 8. (SBU) It is also possible that a nine-province regional government could be formed piecemeal, with at least one

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province forming a region and adjoining provinces later voting to join that region. For this to occur, one-third of the petitioning province's provincial council members would have to request to join a region and one-third of the governing council of the regional government would have to vote to accept the petitioning province -- to be followed by a referendum in each petitioning province.

Basra Provincial Elections

¶ 9. (C) With Fadhilah falling out of favor and Governor Wa'eli declining to run in the provincial elections, a wide range of parties will scramble to fill the power vacuum. Seventy-eight entities had registered by the November 2 deadline. Competition breaks down largely along provincial election coalitions established at the national level -- ISCI/Badr has formed the "Martyrs of the Pulpit and Independent Force List," including three other small Shi'a parties, while Prime Minister Maliki's Da'wa party has a rival "Country of Law" coalition, including several other small parties. Dr. Ibrahim Jaafari has a coalition named

National Trend in al-Basra, which leaves it pretty clear where his target audience is.

¶10. (C) Parties will have to find creative ways of reaching out to Sadrists voters and independents to succeed. In his October 29 conversation with Gray, Badr representative al-Rashid spoke cautiously, but essentially confirmed the widespread view that his party has both a national coalition and a working understanding with several independents that will support an ISCI-led coalition after the election. For example, ISCI/Badr appears to be working in partnership with Basra Prosperity, a one-province coalition locally headlined by Hezbollah Iraq and joined by local Sadrists minor parties. Hezbollah Iraq is part of ISCI's national list, but ISCI is not part of Basra Prosperity. While it is too early to predict who will run the post-election provincial government, Fadhliah's decline increases the chances that established religious parties like ISCI or perhaps Da'wa will be the driving force behind the new provincial government, in coalition with independents. Neither would be favorably inclined to one-province region formation -- or at least not a movement toward region formation led by Wa'eli.

Comment

¶11. (C) By turning in 35,000 signatures, Governor Wa'eli and his allies have given themselves an opportunity to tap into public discontent and push a referendum forward. Unless movement organizers make new alliances immediately and dramatically increase their organizing capacity, they are unlikely to succeed. Even if the Governor's effort falls flat, the province's slow economic development and the multi-billion dollar annual net transfer to Baghdad of oil and other revenues will sustain voter discontent and spark future calls for region formation. For a Basra or pan-southern region to succeed, its organizers will have to convince voters that a regional government will provide security. It will also have to be strong enough within the national Shi'a governing coalition to be established with minimal interference. Ironically, if ISCI strengthens its position in Basra in the provincial elections (and if it patches up differences with the Prime Minister), ISCI could be the only entity able to organize a Basra Regional Government referendum -- which could then accept petitioning provinces hoping to join Basra later. There is no indication, however, that the national ISCI leadership is considering this strategy or that any other plausible route to region formation in the south is currently being pursued.

End comment.

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